

I think I solved a long-time mystery about an iconic old Fairbury photograph.

This old photo shows a large crowd gathered between old City Hall and Waltons. One person is holding a sign with some wording. I have not been able to make out the wording on the relatively poor copies I have seen of this photo.

Waltons had 3 fires. Their first building was on Main Street between 1st and 2nd streets, on the north side. It burned in 1884, so they moved to the corner of 3rd and main. The 2nd fire was in 1896 and the 3rd fire in 1923. The current building was built after the 3rd fire in 1923.

The photo is of the Walton building which was there from 1896 to 1923, so the old photo is between these two dates.

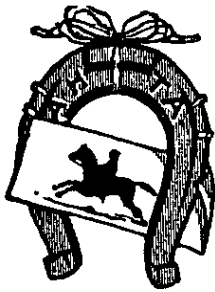
Someone graciously donated a high quality version of the old photo of the crowd. My sister-in-law, Judy Wells, used a magnifying glass to read this sign and it has the words "Fairbury, No. 132, AHTA"

Searching the old Blades on the Dominy Library's web site, I found that AHTA stood for the Anti-Horse Thief Association. It was very active in Fairbury from 1896 until it disbanded in 1902. It started out to catch horse thieves, but morphed into a group interested in enforcing all laws. Alma Lewis James mentions this group in her Stuffed Club & Antimaccassars Fairbury history book.

The Feb. 18, 1897, Blade mentioned the AHTA held a parade and they met in front of old city hall. This is likely the date of this old iconic photograph. I will have to expand this into a new Fairbury history story for future publication on FairburyNews.net.

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## Anti-Horse Thief Association



The Anti-Horse Thief Association (AHTA) was first organized in 1854 by David McKee, a farmer and stock raiser, in Clark County, Missouri. McKee envisioned an organization for the protection of property, especially horses, which was often stolen by thieves living in the border area between Missouri, Illinois, and Iowa, where he lived. The AHTA quickly grew, and soon there were chapters and suborders in several states. In spite of its name, the basic principle of the organization was opposition to law violations of any kind, not just horse theft. Members were to bring criminals to justice, not through vigilantism, but through the court system. AHTA's emblem, the horseshoe, stood for Humanity, Charity, and Justice.

Every year the suborders' presidents would appoint members to serve on pursuing committees, otherwise known as posses. If a theft or other crime occurred, the pursuing committee tracked the offender until his capture. In addition to pursuing committees, AHTA developed vigilance committees whose members kept suspicious persons under surveillance by watching their homes and sometimes following them. In order to obtain evidence, members would occasionally spend days watching the home of a certain thief, as well as a trail or river crossing suspected of being used by criminals.

One of the more notable manhunts involving AHTA members was the protracted search for outlaws Dick Yeager and Ike Black during the summer of 1895. Both were wanted for numerous offenses, including robbery. They had a knack for eluding the law. For two months posses of various deputy sheriffs, constables, and AHTA members pursued the duo over much of Oklahoma Territory and eventually fatally shot Black and mortally wounded Yeager.

In 1916 AHTA had over forty thousand members in Oklahoma, Kansas, Missouri, Iowa, Illinois, Arkansas, New Mexico, Colorado, and South Dakota. By 1933 AHTA members noted that thieves were stealing fewer horses and

other stock but observed that many other types of petty thefts were being committed with greater regularity. As horses ceased to be the primary mode of transportation, the organization changed its name to the Anti-Thief Association (ATA). In subsequent years AHTA, and later ATA, became more of a social and fraternal group than an arm of law enforcement. Most lodges held annual family picnics with planned activities such as horse races, roping events, and other competitions.